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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000660

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECPS](#) [PHUM](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: CUBA'S BLOCKADE: LITTLE INFORMATION FROM THE  
OUTSIDE WORLD ALLOWED THROUGH

REF: A. 08 HAVANA 796 (CUBANS TUNING OUT LOCAL NEWSPAPERS)

[1](#)B. HAVANA 594 (CUBA CHAMPIONS DEMOCRACY IN  
HONDURAS)

[1](#)C. HAVANA 629 ("CUBAN BLOGGER")

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Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. It is hard to overstate how isolated Cubans are from the outside world. Cubans have little or no access to outside news or media, foreign TV or radio programming, or even internet or email. There is little in the way of local content to make up for this dearth of information. What is broadcast or published in Cuba is narrowly filtered, omitting all inconvenient news and information, and laden with self-congratulatory spin. Once information gets through, however, it seems to flow with little impedance, perhaps making communications within the island as important as with the world outside. End Summary.

FROM ELECTIONS TO MLB, CENSORS LET LITTLE THROUGH  
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[1](#)2. (C) News and information from outside Cuba are tightly controlled. Through the government monopoly on print and broadcast news, and through vigorous self-censorship by the few non-government publications that exist, anything that challenges the status quo, encourages self-action or public participation, or hints of political reform is suspect and will usually be blocked. In the official press particularly, foreign demonstrations of support for Cuba and negative stories about the developed world's democracies are played up prominently. Thus, fuel depot explosions in Puerto Rico, layoffs in New York and deaths in Afghanistan are fair game and receive extensive coverage, while little to nothing is reported on riots in Tehran, or the economic recovery in Europe and North America. Like any other day, the official newspaper Granma's October 29 edition ran the following headlines on page three: "Fidel's Commitment to the Health of Cubans is Impressive," "Peace Cruise in Havana," "Spanish Foreign Minister Receives the Wives of (imprisoned Cuban spies) Gerardo and Rene," "Cuban Heroes Honored at Freedom Park," and "Pakistan: More than 90 Deaths After Hillary Clinton's Arrival." Readership of Granma and its companion publication, Juventud Rebelde, is correspondingly small.

[1](#)3. (C) Information that may cast Cuba in a less-than-ideal light almost never makes its way into print or on the air. As a result, other than by word-of-mouth, Cubans have no idea

about the crimes that take place in their cities and neighborhoods, of local diseases or epidemics, or even road accidents because these too are excised. The state censors do not stop at "hard" news. They clamp down just as zealously on media, communications, entertainment, technology and sports news. There is absolutely no coverage, for instance, of the baseball World Series or professional boxing, two hugely popular sports, lest Cuban athletes get ideas about going pro or, worse, if Cubans get to see their athletes prosper in foreign leagues.

¶4. (C) There is no reporting on policy debates at the high levels of government, the Communist Party or the National Assembly. When public debate is allowed (as is currently taking place on how to tackle agricultural shortcomings, Septel), it is narrowly defined, kept within tightly-controlled settings, and unlikely to generate unexpected or unsolicited criticism.

#### OFFICIAL AVERSION TO OUTSIDE NEWS

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¶5. (C) A day after the General Assembly vote on the embargo resolution, the newspapers printed the Cuban Foreign Minister's verbatim reply to Ambassador Rice without publishing a single word from her statement. The blackout is so pervasive that the Nuevo Herald reproductions that USINT distributes freely are said to be bartered for food and other goods, according to an article in the Herald published last September. The official aversion to outside information "has reached truly incomprehensible levels," a Cuban priest who settled back in Havana after a long stint in the Dominican Republic told us. "Cuba should be proud of how little crime there is here, and yet they're not willing to even admit to

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what little goes on."

#### NEWS AS PROPAGANDA

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¶6. (C) The propaganda approach to information dissemination by official media channels here is evident. Newspapers, radio and TV stations will turn from one topic to the next in unison, from popular pressure for Zelaya's return in Honduras (Ref A), to the plight of the "Five Heroes" jailed in the United States for espionage (Septel), to the embargo, and again to the Five Heroes, as they have done in sequence from September to November. Turmoil in Honduras was front page news for months; the U.S. and OAS-brokered resolution to the crisis was buried on page six while the GOC tries to figure out its next move. "The Cuban press is a soldier of the revolution," the editor of a Catholic journal -- one of the few independent publications here -- told us on October 28. A former TV newsman said how the Orwellian-sounding Directory of Revolutionary Organization imparts weekly instruction to all media outlets on what to run.

¶7. (C) Ironically, some of the soldiers themselves complain about the dearth of information. No one has done it more publicly than Juventud Rebelde columnist Jose Alejandro Rodriguez, whose piece, posted online on October 16, railed against the "demons of kidnapped information" who keep Cuba sequestered from the rest of the world. Rodriguez went even further, attacking official media outlets, including standard bearers Granma newspaper and the TV program "Mesa Redonda" (Roundtable), for their trivialization of information, and the GOC itself for its unwillingness to allow the dissemination of anything that may cast it in a bad light. Rodriguez's column never made it to the printing presses; it was pulled from the Juventud Rebelde website within hours of its appearance, but not before it was rescued by dozens of bloggers and international news outlets, who promptly gave it widespread coverage.

#### MIXED RESULTS AT GETTING THROUGH

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¶18. (C) Attempts to circumvent the information blockade have had mixed results. Non-official print media is extremely limited, and mostly confined to religious publications. Cuban bookstores and official libraries only carry officially-sanctioned media that results in numerous volumes of revolutionary literature but little else. The largest newspapers, Granma and Juventud Rebelde, have less than ten crudely laid-out pages. Their content is just as crude, much of it propaganda from the Soviet-era playbooks. There are no entertainment magazines or publications.

¶19. (C) The few non-official publishers must overcome significant obstacles in order to print anything. The GOC directly controls or licenses all printing presses. Printers are scarce (even more so than computers), desperately sought-after and the GOC strictly controls the supply. Even with a computer and printer, an organization will be hard-pressed to find cartridges, ink and paper. While foreign missions and small, independent libraries provide limited access to some printed materials, demand considerably outstrips supply.

#### TV AND RADIO

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¶10. (C) TV and radio are just as tightly controlled. Often serving as little more than spoken versions of the print media, the stations regurgitate the same propaganda about the U.S. embargo, cataclysms in the United States and the overwhelming popularity of presidents Chavez, Morales and Ortega, but little on elections elsewhere, economic recovery, etc. Radio Marti is much more accessible than its televised counterpart but still faces daily interference. Voice of America can be picked up with heavy interference, but only with a shortwave radio, which are not available in Cuba (many of our contacts treasure the ones that they have received from USINT over the years). Ironically, the officially-sanctioned Venezuelan station Telesur station provides some of the few glimpses of foreign news that most people elsewhere take for granted. Illegal satellite feeds

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are coveted by Cubans, and the GOC is constantly on the lookout for illegal dishes.

#### ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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¶11. (C) Electronic media is more widely distributed, partly because the GOC has not figured out how to clamp down on it as effectively as it does with other media. The GOC has the wherewithal to and does intercept email, and block access to the most famous blogs and pro-democracy sites (Ref B). Just as effective, however, are its efforts to place Internet facilities beyond the reach of most people. On November 2, the press reported that a Craigslist-like site, Revolico.com, where Cubans buy and sell goods and services, was being blocked. Some of the services offered included satellite internet and cable, which the advertisers proclaimed, "so you never get blocked again."

¶12. (C) Only few Cubans have permission to have access to the Internet. The Brookings Institution cited numbers that rank Cuba below Haiti in internet connectivity. When access is granted, it is restricted by content (either by blocking sites or by providing a barebones GOC-centered, intranet), data transfer (with limits of around 30Mb per month), price (the Catholic Council of Bishops' GOC-run broadband costs \$650 a month, while dial-up runs at about \$75 monthly, equivalent to 3.5 times the average monthly salary) or monitoring of pages visited (as we have heard is the case with Latin American Medical School students who are called to account when they visit "suspect" websites). Some of those who have access run illegal internet cafes throughout the

island (Septel), and some Cubans also access the Internet by paying for expensive, hourly access at hotels, but both are subject to GOC blocks.

#### DOMESTIC DISSEMINATION

¶13. (C) Despite the blockade, information does make it onto the island. DVDs of World Series games, for example, are available within a day or two. AM radio stations from the Florida Keys are audible at varying times most evenings, at least in Havana. For some reason, the GOC is not as aggressive in pursuing information that gets through as it is in trying to block its entry into the country. Harassment for possession of what the GOC considers objectionable materials, such as the Miami Herald, and the news summaries or books that USINT distributes, is rare. Internet bloggers report being able to distribute DVDs of their blogs and other blocked sites with little interference from the authorities.

¶14. (C) Increasingly, our Cuban contacts are also pointing to the arts and cultural world as a freer channel for information flow and dissemination (Septel). Unlike most Cubans, artists get to travel outside and are much more familiar with news, information and ideas from the outside world. An essay by a famous Cuban actor currently filming in Spain is circulating in the island. In it he decries the lack of internet in Cuba, and laments that the information isolation in the island is only matched by North Korea.

#### COMMENT: A FERTILE PATCH IN BARREN GROUND

¶15. (C) Whether by neglect or with intent, the GOC has left some space that, though still small, is growing. Once Cubans get their hands on information that is suppressed in the official media, independent journalists, internet advocates and independent libraries, among others, do their best to disseminate it. Although for the most part their reach continues to be limited, the proliferation of cell phones, bluetooth devices and other means of electronic transfers is making it easier to disseminate information domestically, and harder for the authorities to continue blocking it. As computer and cell phone ownership continue to rise, the challenge of containing the flood of information will likewise grow.

FARRAR